

# Building pillars of cultural capital

I recently wrote a column on the growing unfairness of American life. The column was about the economic and social stratifications that are setting in as the information age matures. Highly educated parents pass their advantages down to their children, while the children of less-educated parents fall further behind.

As a result, life prospects are wildly unequal.

**David Brooks**



As Ross Douthat notes in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a child growing up in a family earning over \$90,000 has a 1 in 2 chance of getting a college degree by age 24; a child

in a family earning \$35,000 to \$61,000 has a 1 in 10 chance; a child in a family earning under \$35,000 has a 1 in 17 chance.

The main problem is not that poor students can't afford college. This country has oceans of financial aid sloshing around. As William Bowen, Martin Kurzweil and Eugene Tobin note in their book, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*: "The number of students who are currently prevented from enrolling by a straightforward inability to pay is small."

Nor is the main problem that these poorer students don't have access to college. Over the last few decades, the share of young Americans who enter college has shot upward.

The problem is that students who enter college often find they are unable to thrive there. As enrollment rates have shot up, completion rates have actually drifted down. And it is students from less-educated families who are dropping out most.

The new inequality is different from the old inequality. To-

day, the rich don't exploit the poor, they just outcompete them. Their crucial advantage is not that they possess financial capital, it's that they possess more cultural capital.

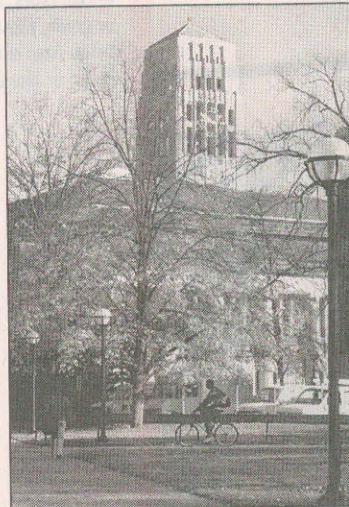
Since I wrote that column, I've been inundated with letters and e-mail messages from people who are working to tackle this problem. The best of these efforts are directed at helping students from less-educated families accumulate what you might call the four pillars of cultural capital.

**Academic Competence.** Students are not going to be able to thrive in college if they graduate from high school doing eighth-grade work. That's why colleges and universities nationwide have decided they can't just wait for students to come to them. They are adopting high schools and creating curriculums designed to prepare students for college work. Charter schools like KIPP Academies are springing up, specializing in tough, intensive college prep for poorer kids.

**Practical Competence.** Surveys show that poorer students understand the importance of college and want to attend. But many adopt a magical worldview, imagining that success will somehow come to them out of the blue. An astonishing number of students register for the SAT tests, but don't bother to show up on exam day. Students do well in high school, but don't fill out college applications because they don't feel like writing the essays.

Colleges are now sending out student ambassadors to coach and nag other students through the mundane, day-to-day steps that lead to college admissions and success.

**Economic confidence.** Poorer students are risk-averse. Often overly intimidated by college costs, unwilling to take out stu-



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dent loans, too quick to leave school to get a job, they wind up underinvesting in their education.

The great sociologist Daniel Bell suggests that the best response is to shift financial aid into federally financed savings accounts, delivered to students at birth and growing over time, to use to pay for school. Students with these nest eggs would have

a greater sense of security and less of a feeling that they were sending their families over an economic precipice.

**Social Confidence.** Elite schools have become bastions of privilege. Last year, there were more students at the University of Michigan from families earning over \$200,000 than there were from families earning less than the national median of about \$53,000. Poorer kids often feel uncomfortable at such places and choose schools where they will fit in, even if they are not academically rigorous enough for their needs.

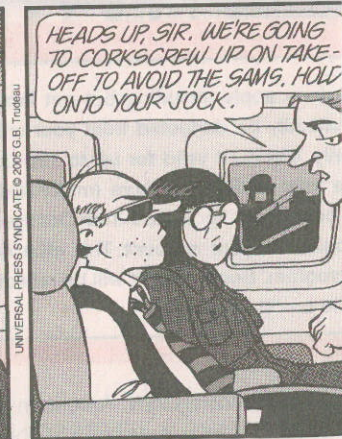
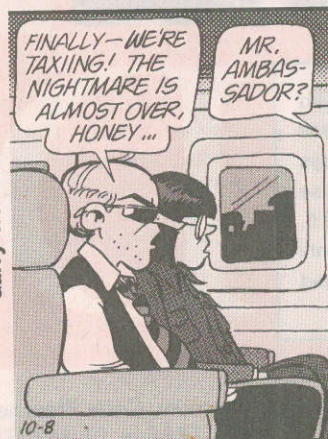
Now there is a move, led by the former Princeton president, William Bowen, to give poorer kids an admissions advantage at elite universities. It's a crude step, but probably necessary, so that poorer students on campus will not feel as if they are on alien ground.

The forces driving cultural inequality are powerful, and maybe insurmountable. But each generation of Americans seems to be challenged in its own way to provide its children with an open field and a fair chance. This is our challenge.

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**DOONESBURY**

Garry Trudeau



HEADS UP, SIR. WE'RE GOING TO CORKSCREW UP ON TAKE-OFF TO AVOID THE SAMs. HOLD ONTO YOUR JOCK.

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